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Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development

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# 1997 **Minister's Forum**

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## **on Adult Learning**

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*What we heard ...*

February 1998

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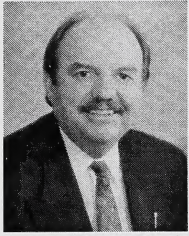
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# What we heard...

## A message from the Minister



The 1997 Minister's Forum on Adult Learning was my first as Minister of Advanced Education and Career Development. I came away from the Forum much impressed by the wealth of ideas expressed over the day and a half of discussions. To me, it reflects the importance that we all place in people development and in the

need to invest in the skills, knowledge and ideas of Albertans through our support of adult learning.

The theme for the 1997 Minister's Forum On Adult Learning was **Access To Relevant Learning**. I am committed to taking your ideas under consideration as we develop our three year business plans and in taking immediate action where necessary. One particular area of concern identified at the Forum was for the department to do more to help high needs students with the cost of learning. The Premier, in his January 9<sup>th</sup> televised address, announced that Advanced Education and Career Development would work with institutions and the private sector to assist these students through the new Alberta Opportunities Bursary. He also announced additional funding in several targeted areas to expand access. More details will be available upon release of the department's 1998 - 2001 Business Plan.

Consultations such as the Minister's Forum provide an excellent opportunity for us to gain an understanding of the diversity of interests related to adult learning. I look forward to focused consultations on specific topics between now and the next Minister's Forum On Adult Learning to be held in the fall of 1999.

Thank you to those who participated in the 1997 forum. Your input was valuable. Together we can ensure Albertans of quality learning and research excellence.

Sincerely,



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Clint Dunford  
Minister

## Topic 1 - Defining The Challenge *(This topic was discussed by 238 participants in 13 small groups)*

In his opening remarks, the Minister outlined a number of challenges for the adult learning system:

- Over the next 5-10 years, how should post-secondary institutions and the apprenticeship system expand their capacity to meet the increased enrolment demands of Albertans?
- How can we best meet the demand of short and long-term skill shortages associated with provincial economic growth?
- How can we best provide for quality learning opportunities to the greatest number of Albertans at a reasonable cost to the learner and the taxpayer?
- How can we help Albertans make decisions about their career plans and the knowledge and skill requirements that go with them?
- How can we better support high needs students through the student finance system?

The Minister also stressed the importance of people development - the top priority for action emerging from the recent Growth Summit.

A panel discussion involving six individuals was held to bring additional perspectives aimed at defining the challenges facing Alberta's adult learning system. The panelists included:

- Ken Chapman - Canadian Information Processing Society
- Tom Keenan - Faculty of Continuing Education, University of Calgary
- Wynne Leung - Student, Faculty of Science, University of Alberta
- Kristy Mandrusiak - Student, Grade 12, Tofield High School
- Stephen Murgatroyd - University Development, Athabasca University
- John Vanderput - Northern Operations, Nova Gas Transmissions

Participants then broke into small groups to discuss and share their views concerning challenges to Alberta's adult learning system. Specifically, participants were asked to identify challenges in addition to those identified by the department and to provide feedback on departmental consultation methods used to engage partners in adult learning (providers, learners, business, community and government). Participants were also asked to describe the major issues associated with the challenges identified by the department. *Note: The listing of these issues has been incorporated under the summaries of individual topic discussions.*

### **Additional Challenges To Be Addressed**

There was general agreement among the participants around the importance of the challenges as outlined by the department (accommodating increasing numbers of learners, addressing the needs of the economy, affordability for learners and enabling learners' career decisions). Some felt that the challenges were too narrowly focused on employability and that there needed to be an emphasis on training critical thinkers and not just future workers. In addition, other key challenges were identified by participants. These included:

#### **• Transformation of the post-secondary system**

- The trend towards an open education agenda (learners will be served and have choices made available to them by institutions around the world).
- Addressing the needs of life long learners.
- The need to incorporate prior learning assessment and improve the transfer of credit between institutions.
- Teaching/learning models that incorporate technologies.
- Information technology infrastructure.
- Marketing of, access to, prompt development and delivery of apprenticeship programming that reflects changing skills requirements.

- Ways of encouraging and rewarding collaboration amongst institutions and other partners.

#### **• Quality of education**

- Supporting centres of excellence. Understanding the full context of learning and the associated benefits.
- Acknowledging that there is more to learning than training an individual for a career. Society, it was said, benefits from learning that promotes culture, citizenship and the ideal of having a mission in life outside of oneself.
- Determining how best to measure the quality of education and determining whether Alberta should be benchmarking against international standards.
- Educating specialists as opposed to generalists. What direction should public institutions take?

Some participants felt that quality assurance at the institutional level could be improved. It was suggested that learners should have greater say in the issues affecting the quality of their education. It was also felt that changes were needed in key performance indicators (KPI's) as a measure of quality. There was agreement that funding mechanisms needed to be introduced which encouraged collaboration amongst institutions and between institutions and industry.

A few participants felt that Alberta was now in position to create the best education system in the world and that this was the overarching challenge. Investment, it was said, was needed to support new "leading edge" program development, to attract top faculty and researchers, and to make the changes necessary to accommodate increasing numbers of learners.

A number of groups felt that increasing the level of commitment by industry in training employees and sponsoring individuals in post-secondary institutions was important.

## Processes to Ensure the Involvement of all Partners in Adult Learning

While it was generally agreed that the Minister's Forum on Adult Learning should be continued, there was no consensus whether the Forum should be held annually or on a bi-annual basis. While the department was praised for its record of public consultation, it was suggested that the department could produce a document that showed how the department acted upon what was recommended at the Forum.

Participants also called for smaller scale forums or focus groups where select stakeholders could debate specific issues to a greater level of depth. It was suggested that the department involve stakeholders in such sessions to identify agenda items and provide experts to present subject matter. Participants suggested greater consultation with Albertans from rural areas. Use of the Internet as a consultative mechanism was also suggested.

Participants offered a number of comments around additional processes that would be needed to help the adult learning system transform to meet the changing needs of an increasing number and diversity of learners.

- Institutions hoping to attract learners and top faculty will have to focus program offerings to enhance their reputation nationally and internationally.
- Targetted funding should not lead to micro-management of institutions.
- The department needs funding mechanisms that support collaboration and partnerships.
- Coordinated learning strategies are required from K-12 through post-secondary.

A question that was raised by one group was whether the department wanted to transform the adult learning system or simply improve it. Many in the group felt that fundamental changes were needed and that current business plan strategies were not sufficient to meet the demands being placed on the system.

## Topic 2 - Accommodating Increasing Numbers of Learners *(This topic was attended by 161 participants in 8 small group sessions)*

The growth of the high school graduate population, the need for skill upgrading and retraining in the workplace, and the general movement of the adult population toward participating in lifelong learning will create access pressures for Alberta's public post-secondary institutions. It is estimated, for example, that the number of high school graduates will grow from 25,000 in 1996 to 34,500 in 2005. Such factors will lead to the creation of many new opportunities within the adult learning system.

It is difficult to forecast the precise number of new entrants that may need to be accommodated within the adult learning system over the next 5-10 years. Many factors influence such demand forecasts including the nature of the economy and corresponding job market; the enrolment capacity within programs and institutions; the cost of learning; and the increased need for ongoing upgrading of skills.

In this session, participants were asked for advice regarding the characteristics of long-term enrolment demand. They were also asked to describe a reasonable goal for increasing the percentage of Alberta's population participating in post-secondary education. In addition, participants were asked for their input on how access and the capacity of the adult learning system could be increased, given the limited resources available for increasing the physical infrastructure of current institutions.

### Issues Associated With Accommodating Increasing Numbers of Learners

A number of participants felt that this challenge was regional in nature. It was suggested that accommodating increasing numbers of learners may only be a challenge in large urban centres. It was felt by some that the existing system was too

rigid to accommodate the increasing number and diversity of learners that would be seeking access. Some participants also felt that the needs of existing learners were not being met. It was also suggested that the 35-plus age group will ultimately place greater demands on the system than will the long-term demographics associated with the 18-24 year old group. Participants mentioned several other issues requiring attention including:

- The need to provide assistance to faculty and support staff.
- The need to provide changes to programming that reflect the nature of demands on the learner (e.g. greater and more flexible provision of part-time programming).
- The need to shorten the length of diploma and degree programs.
- The need to provide a greater measure of financial and other supports for individuals with barriers.
- The need to improve the transfer arrangements between colleges, technical institutes and universities.
- The need for a greater use of prior learning assessments.
- The need for business and industry to do more of their own training.
- The need for a broader range of advanced credit programming that could be made available through the primary school (K-12) system.



some of the factors affecting enrolment. The factors mentioned by participants included:

- The ability to predict who will continue on from Grade 12 to post-secondary, and how many people from the workforce will return to school.
- Globalization of peoples' educational opportunities.
- Rising student debt levels.
- The elevation of minimum requirements for jobs (most now require a post-secondary credential).
- The state of the economy.

Participants felt that a flexible and adaptable system, able to deliver courses through alternative methods,

at convenient times and locations was key to addressing these factors. A few participants feared that enrolment across the adult learning system would actually drop unless such flexible arrangements (increased access to part-time learning opportunities, accelerated learning, prior learning assessment, distance learning, evening courses, etc.) were introduced. The issue of enhanced financial assistance options for mature learners was identified by participants.

Some participants also advised that while the needs of Albertans on welfare are important, other high needs groups should be considered. In particular, the growing Aboriginal population was cited as an area to review in future, as well as the needs of the disabled and new Canadians.

Participants agreed that the economy was a critical factor in forecasting future enrolment demand and that the emphasis at present was in high technology and trades training which require post-secondary education. Some foresaw the need to prepare learners for a future of lifelong learning and to create their own work

## Future Enrolment Demand and it's Characteristics

General consensus among all the groups was that future enrolment is very difficult to predict and that the department should take steps to address

opportunities. A few participants stated that they were concerned that the existing incentives were not sufficient for institutions to increase enrolment capacity. Others cited a concern with the high attrition rate of first year learners.

Participants noted that many institutions were forecasting future enrolment demands through advisory committees established for individual programs, through market research and occupational analyses. In order to more accurately forecast enrolment demand, some participants felt that institutions needed to make stronger connections with industry and small business in particular.

### **Targets for Participation and Enrolment**

There was a general consensus among participants that learning opportunities be made available to adult Albertans who wish to enrol in post-secondary programs and who meet some minimum qualification standard. There was no consensus on minimum qualification requirements for entry into post secondary programs.

It also generally agreed that the higher the level of education an individual receives the better the employment success the individual will experience. Participants felt that more needed to be done to increase access and extend the benefits of education to those who would not otherwise be able to attend. Some participants stressed the importance of increasing access to those with financial and other barriers.

Some participants voiced a concern that Alberta was below the national average in terms of the populations participation in post-secondary learning and that participation could be increased by marketing under-subscribed programs, enhancing the appeal of a career in the trades and making re-entry in learning programs for mature learners as easy as possible. Some saw a need to increase efforts to raise awareness and promote the full range of post-secondary learning opportunities to young people in the K-12 system. Participants also said that the K-12 curriculum needed to be improved in this area.

### **Ideas for Increasing Access and the Capacity of the Adult Learning System**

Participants had numerous ideas concerning new learning models or other mechanisms that could be used to increase access/capacity within the adult learning system. In terms of broad directions, participants recommended that prior learning assessment be implemented across the system. Participants also called for higher levels of investment by government on technology, institutional infrastructure and human resources (attracting top faculty and providing an adequate level of faculty support).

A number of participants felt that investment and involvement by industry was critical to increasing access. Direct financial sponsorship of students, participation in co-op, internship and mentoring programs, and investment in technology infrastructure were all mentioned as ways that will allow institutions to provide an expanded and full range of opportunities to learners.

Specific ideas for increasing access and the system's capacity included:

- Implementation of accelerated learning models (reduce the length of programs).
- Using the Internet to teach courses /introduce a common Internet server.
- Moving towards six day learning weeks, year round classes (trimesters), day and evening class offerings.
- Reducing the number of non-credit offerings.
- Opening the Access Fund and Learning Enhancement Envelope to industry and private learning providers.
- Providing greater levels of financial support to those learners for whom the cost of education is a demonstrated barrier to access.
- Increasing course brokering by institutions and changes to KPI's that would eliminate any disincentives to expanding access in such a fashion.
- Allowing program approvals to occur at the local level.
- Soliciting input from aboriginal groups at a regional level.

- Introducing changes to curriculum that would provide a greater allowance for self-study.
- Providing more incentives that would allow for a greater emphasis on teaching as opposed to research.
- Enhancing the use of alternative delivery mechanisms such as video-conferencing.

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### ***Next steps/Advice to the Minister***

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- ♦ Modify KPI's to reward increased access and capacity within the system. Increase the level of funding in the performance envelopes.
- ♦ Support the development of a common platform for distance delivery by institutions.
- ♦ Approach Telus/Shaw Cable for example, to increase bandwidth for all institutions.
- ♦ Implement prior learning assessment, develop learner passports.
- ♦ Strengthen partnerships between government, post-secondary institutions, private providers, and industry.
- ♦ Broaden the use of articulation agreements between high school jurisdictions and post-secondary institutions.
- ♦ Improve credit transfer arrangements between post-secondary institutions.

## **Topic 3: Addressing the Needs of the Economy**

*(This topic was attended by 137 participants in 7 small group sessions)*

A highly-skilled workforce is essential for Alberta to prosper in a knowledge-based global economy. Alberta's economy is expected to perform well above the Canadian average over the next 5-10 years. As Alberta's industries gear-up to build at an unprecedented rate and scale, the demands on the workforce in terms of numbers, skill requirements and technology will increase.

As outlined in Alberta's economic development strategy, it is essential that the province

- improve Albertan's ability to enter the workforce and keep pace with changing skills;

- link public funding of post-secondary institutions to performance indicators such as the employment success of graduates; and
- remove barriers that prevent mobility and full participation in the workforce.

In this session participants were asked to identify potential skill shortage areas and the emerging employability skills - the knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning - that will be critical to individual and collective economic success. Participants were also asked for input as to how government and post-secondary institutions might respond faster to meet skill and knowledge requirements in the short-term. Also under consideration was the question of how stakeholders could be brought into a more collaborative (shared responsibilities and costs) effort aimed at meeting the evolving demand for learning associated with knowledge growth.

### **Issues Associated With Addressing the Needs of the Economy**

While many participants conceded that it was very difficult to pin down the changing nature of supply and demand of workers, better forecasting of future skills shortages was viewed as essential. Participants suggested that this would only be possible through the on-going collaborative efforts of government, business and industry, and post-secondary institutions. Another issue raised by participants concerned the skills required by business and industry of an individual graduating from post-secondary programs. While many felt there was a positive move within educational programming towards specialization (technical skills), discussion also centered on the need to provide learners with a general education and an emphasis on soft skills (e.g. team skills, the ability to listen, a strong work ethic). Some felt that industry should pick up a portion of the costs related to the development of specialized curricula for their sector. Other issues or trends that participants identified included:

- The need to provide global education opportunities for Albertans.
- The need for better information on where graduates get work.

- The need for certification of skills acquired through work (prior learning assessment).
- The importance of innovation and research (some felt that these two items were missing from the dialogue).

## Identification of Skill Shortage Areas

Participants agreed that individuals will need to acquire a variety of skill sets in order to obtain, maintain or create employment opportunities in the future. Individuals, it was said, will also be required to upgrade their skills and knowledge far more frequently than was required in the past. Most participants also agreed that a demonstrated proficiency in a number of other skill areas e.g. personal management, teamwork, written and oral communication, etc. will be as important to employment success as technical skills.

Participants also stressed the need for increased professional development opportunities for post-secondary faculty so that they can remain current on the changing needs. This professional development could include time spent in related industry sectors.

Participants identified a number of specific short and long-term skills shortage areas.

## Short Term Technical Skills in Demand

- Engineering - mechanical, civil, electrical and chemical.
- Trades - carpenters, welders, electricians, electrical and machinery instrumentation, millwrights, heavy equipment operators.
- Oil and Gas - technical support in geological, geophysics and other related areas.
- Information Systems - programmers, technologists as well as researchers who can navigate information systems to access knowledge.

## Short and Long-Term Technical Skill Shortage Areas

- Computer Related - software development and computer programming.
- Applied Sciences - agricultural (food and non-food products), composite materials(e.g. plastic moldings), forestry related, etc.
- Health Related - specialization's in nursing (home care, elderly), health research and pharmaceutical industry.

## General Areas Required in the Short and/or Long Term

- Language Skills - proficiency in two or more languages.
- Literacy Skills - includes numeracy and computer literacy skills.
- International Skills - knowledge of international trade, international law, multi-national corporations.
- Business/Entrepreneurial Skills - the ability to develop a business plan.
- Critical Thinking Skills - the ability to problem solve, think creatively, analytically and independently.
- Conflict Resolution Skills - negotiation, collective bargaining, etc.
- Interpersonal Skills - communication, building relationships, teamwork, listening.
- Organization and Life Skills - personal hygiene, ability to manage stress, organize time, handle money.
- Multi-Cultural Awareness - sensitivity to the unique characteristics and nature of other cultures.
- Citizenship - Community development, volunteerism, philosophy, arts and humanities, ethics.
- Leadership - ability to show initiative, direct others and motivate.

## Strategies for Meeting Short-Term Skill Requirements

A primary concern of participants was the time it takes to develop new programs in response to skill shortages. These concerns, they said, apply to apprenticeship programming through technical institutes as well as college and university programming.

There was some agreement among participants that further partnerships were needed between post-secondary institutions and industry to respond more quickly to short and long-term skill and knowledge requirements. Such arrangements, it was said, would also allow for greater information sharing regarding skills in demand and allow for more flexible, innovative and responsive programs. It was also suggested that an ongoing mechanism be established to solicit input from learners on how programs may be improved (more in-depth than a satisfaction survey).

Participants offered a number of strategies aimed at improving the general responsiveness of programs including:

- Changing current program approval mechanisms.
- Providing incentives to industry sectors that do their own training. Tax credits or tax holidays were suggested as ways to increase the level of industry participation in skills and knowledge development.
- Shortening the length of programs.
- Setting aside funds for curriculum development.
- Finding a mechanism to implement “just-in-time” training when an immediate opportunity presents itself.
- Looking at strategies that have been used in other jurisdictions.
- Implementing a comprehensive skills assessment and verification process and provide a mechanism to accredit for prior learning.
- Continuing to develop and improve credit transfer arrangements between institutions.

## **Apprenticeship Programs**

There were a number of specific comments made by participants concerning apprenticeship programming. Cross-over programs that allow for multi-crafting were recommended as a way of responding to many individuals seeking more than one ticket. Participants had positive comments concerning programs such as the Registered Apprenticeship Program and urged the department to undertake greater promotion of trades as a career option at the high school level.

It was suggested that apprenticeship programs be offered at more convenient times (evenings and weekends). It was also suggested that community consortia could be used to deliver early coursework that was more generic in nature. This might include some general training (e.g. teamwork, communication, etc.) which would allow individuals to remain in their local communities and reduce the time needed to be spent at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology or the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology.

## **Lessons Learned From the Past**

Discussions also took place around strategies to address short-term skill shortages that had been learned from past periods of economic growth. Participants suggested that institutions should be more flexible and be challenged to develop new programs and eliminate others on a regular and frequent basis. Institutions, it was suggested, may also have to specialize as a way to focus their efforts.

Some participants suggested that trades and other technical skills training should be encouraged during economic downturns to position the labour force for periods of economic growth.

## **Shared Stakeholder Responsibilities and Costs In Meeting Evolving Knowledge and Skill Requirements**

Participants had mixed views on effective ways of forecasting knowledge and skill requirements as well as the roles stakeholders should take in meeting the growing demand for learning. While opinions varied as to who should play a primary role, there was some agreement that it was important for all stakeholders to share information. It was suggested that information be pooled from many sources including post-secondary institutions, Advanced Education and Career Development, Alberta Labour, and industry. It was also suggested that stakeholders look internationally to determine skill requirement trends.

Participants saw government as playing a key role. They saw government taking the role of a facilitator as well as providing the financial support necessary to bring stakeholders together to discuss skill requirements and to encourage partnerships between industry and post-secondary institutions.

Participants encouraged institutions to provide innovative and flexible program delivery. Suggestions included delivering programming through the facilities of employers, providing prior learning assessment to prevent individuals from taking unnecessary courses, and providing flexible opportunities for learners who are working while attending school. Institutions,

participants said, could also broaden stakeholder input into curriculum development. It was felt that institutions should partner with industry and solicit their involvement in developing customized technical skills related programming.

Participants generally agreed that industry was a critical partner in adult learning and that a greater level of involvement was needed to ensure access to relevant learning opportunities. Participants suggested that this involvement needed to be in terms of financial support (e.g. sponsoring learners, training their own employees) information support and expertise (e.g. curriculum development) and support in-kind (providing their facilities as training sites).

Lastly, it was agreed that learners need to take responsibility for their learning and endeavour to continually upgrade their skills. Some participants saw the need for open dialogue on the part of all stakeholders to ensure that the needs of learners were given due consideration.

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### Advice to the Minister

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- ◆ Improve the coordination between the K-12 and adult learning systems.
- ◆ The Minister should convene a meeting of industry partners to discuss joint ventures.
- ◆ Determine which programs should receive public funding and which should be cost-recoverable.
- ◆ Target good program development as is being done through the Learner Enhancement Envelope.
- ◆ Change KPI's to encourage collaboration, to provide an opportunity to measure the quality of education being delivered and to eliminate any possibility of manipulation of results.

## Topic 4 - Affordability For Learners

*(This topic was attended by 123 participants in 6 small group sessions)*

Since 1993-94, significant changes have occurred in how post-secondary institutions are being funded and the level of public funding they

receive. A three-year 21% reduction in grants to post-secondary institutions was implemented in 1994-95. As a result, Alberta's public post-secondary institutions have had to broaden their revenue base through increases in tuition as well as increased revenue from non-credit programs, ancillary revenues, research revenues and revenues from other sources.

In 1994-95 a revised tuition fee policy established a "cap" on the amount of tuition which an institution could set. The policy set a ceiling (30% of net operating expenditures) for revenue from instruction (including tuition) received by institutions. This 30% ceiling cannot be reached before 2001.

Financing of post-secondary education is a shared responsibility among students, parents, spouses and government. The government's commitment is to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent learners from pursuing a post-secondary education. About one half of Alberta full-time post-secondary students each year receive student loans (an approximate 60/40 mix of federal and provincial loans). Of these, about half graduate with loans under \$10,000 after "remission" (a provincial loan forgiveness program). The federal government does not currently operate a remission program.

The rate of increase in tuition fees along with the manageability of student debt are issues that have been raised at a federal level as well as provincially through the Growth Summit consultation process.

In this session participants were asked for their views on particular aspects of the tuition fee policy, what a reasonable level of debt should be, and on the remission program. Participants were also asked for ideas on how partners in adult learning could work together to ensure that the federal government does its share to address these issues.

## **Issues Associated With Affordability for Learners**

Some participants felt that the existing tax structure did not support a learning society and that changes were necessary (e.g. tax credits for employers). Most of the discussion centered however on issues associated with the cost of post-secondary education to the learner. There was a wide range of opinion on the current

affordability of post-secondary education. Some participants felt that costs to the learner were fairly reasonable and that tuition fees could stand to go up to a level somewhere above the current 30% ceiling. Others felt that tuition and other costs were becoming a significant barrier, particularly for low income groups such

as single mothers. The major issues identified by participants were:

- Increasing student debt.
- Increased technology-related costs for the learner.
- Rising costs of living as compared to the level of financial assistance available.
- Establishing the right balance point between loans and grants.
- A need to more fully understand the remission program.

## **Comments Concerning the Tuition Fee Policy**

Participants in this session offered comments on all aspects of the tuition fee policy. Some felt that the policy was working while others did not. There was considerable debate on the following issues:

### ***How the tuition cap is calculated***

A number of participants were concerned about the calculation of tuition. Concerns were raised that the calculations were too complex and were being applied inconsistently across institutions. It was suggested that the department communicate a standard formula to be followed in making the calculations to eliminate any uncertainty around whether certain variables (ancillary fees, revenues from full cost-recovery programs, etc.) should be

included or excluded. It was also suggested that independent audits be carried out to ensure that calculations are undertaken on a consistent basis.

One participant suggested that the current tuition fee policy leaves students open to ongoing increases because the

percentage of costs institutions can recoup in tuition fees is directly proportional to institutional operating expenditures. As one goes up, so does the other. As an alternative, it was recommended that the amount charged for tuition fees be fixed in proportion to the operating grant institutions receive from the department.

### ***The process for consultation with students on the setting of tuition fees***

While all participants agreed with the tuition fee policy requirement for institutions to consult with learners concerning the setting of fees, student participants were generally critical of the institutions approach. Many felt that institutions were not consulting with them in a meaningful way and were simply informing students of tuition fee increases.

### ***Appropriate tuition fee levels***

There was general agreement that learners are responsible for paying a fair portion of the cost of their education. Many participants, including learners, did not feel that current tuition fee levels



were unreasonable. It was generally felt that parents and learners need to take more responsibility earlier on to save towards cost of post-secondary education. Student participants expressed concerns however with further hikes in tuition fees.

In terms of a quality education, some learners commented that they were paying more but felt that they were receiving less. It was also suggested that more and more learners were having to take on part-time jobs to finance the cost of their education and that this was affecting their ability to get the most out of their education. One participant suggested that the department undertake research on the reasons why enrolled learners were withdrawing and to determine whether cost was a factor.

#### *Legislating a cap on tuition fees*

A number of student participants suggested that the current 30% tuition fee policy "cap" be legislated. It was felt that this would offer some protection to learners, particularly in regards to predictability in fee setting, consultation, and the way fees are calculated. Students felt that this legislation should also provide penalties in instances where the tuition fee policy was violated.

### **Reasonable Debt Levels**

There was no consensus on whether current debt levels are manageable for graduates. Some participants felt that debt levels were not a concern and that it was an individual's responsibility to ensure financing for their education. A number felt that rising costs were inevitable and that information on tax incentives (RESP's) be made available to parents so that they can begin saving early for their children's education. Other participants felt that debt levels were a concern, particularly for single parent learners and older learners with family responsibilities.

A number of comments and ideas were offered on issues associated with debt levels and on student financing in general.

- The interest rates charged by banks and the high amortization periods for loans are unreasonable.
- Government needs a plan to deal with the high default rate.
- High debt loads are scaring potential learners (particularly those with low incomes) from applying.
- Borrowers need an option to suspend principal payments for 3-5 years after graduation.
- Address costs associated with relocation. Bring back equilization grants.
- Reduce ancillary fees and the costs of textbooks.
- Ease debt by reducing the length of programs from 4 years to 3 years.
- Do customer research on the quality of service provided by the student financing system.
- Make the interest paid on student loans tax-deductible.
- Make more student financing options available to older learners and part-time learners.
- Do not penalize students applying for student loans who are living at home.
- Ensure equity in what learners pay for tuition.

### **The Existing Remission Program**

There was a general consensus among participants that the remission program was not well understood and that the department could do a better job of communicating the program to all those concerned (particularly learners and lending institutions). It was also suggested that the loans officers and student finance counsellors at lending institutions could improve their knowledge and level of service in the area of remission.

Participants had differing views on the basic principles around loans versus grants. Some were of the opinion that all student financing should be loan based and that the full loan should be repaid within a reasonable time frame. Others felt that more emphasis needed to be placed on grant-based funding. The majority of participants holding this view advocated front-ending

financial support through grants and scholarships, thereby eliminating the need for a remission program. One recommendation was for a portion of the provincial budget surplus to be directed into increased scholarships and grants for learners.

## Working With The Federal Government

Participants felt that it was important to see some harmonization in the current federal/provincial student loan system. Many commented that increased cooperation was needed and participants advocated a one-loan system approach. A few participants urged the province to consult with learners prior to engaging the federal government in any new discussions aimed at reducing student debt levels.

As the federal government currently has no remission program, it was suggested that common ground for discussions between Alberta and the federal government could be found by focusing on increasing up-front grants and scholarships. One participant suggested that the federal government's Millennium Fund be a focal point for such discussions. Another idea raised was to lobby the federal government to start an educational fund for all Canadian children through a National Child Benefit.

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## Advice to the Minister

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- ◆ To ease the debt problem, lobby industry to provide students with higher paying summer jobs.
- ◆ Instead of increasing loan limits, raise the level of grants and scholarships.
- ◆ Simplify and standardize the application of the tuition fee policy.
- ◆ Research different models of reducing student debt levels and default rates in other jurisdictions.
- ◆ Support employment education contracts where learners educational costs are sponsored by government or industry in return for a guaranteed number of years of service.
- ◆ Encourage the development of alternative educational formats that will accommodate

working students (e.g. increased evening program offerings, co-op programs).

- ◆ Offer tax remedies (e.g. a tax break for students with loans, tax credits for employers providing training).
- ◆ Provide more information on remission and processes associated with acquiring a student loan.

## Topic 5 - Enabling Learners' Career

**Decisions** *(This topic was attended by 95 participants in 5 small group sessions)*

Changes to Alberta's economy based on knowledge growth and new technologies has led to an increased need for information of the type that will help learners plan their careers and understand knowledge and skills required to access relevant learning and work opportunities.

Advanced Education and Career Development offers a variety of counselling and information and career services to meet needs through Career Development Centres and Labour Market Information Centres that have been established in communities across the province. Individuals can also access information resources through the Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) web site as well as the Career Information Hotline (a toll-free telephone information and referral service).

In this session, participants identified the type of information needed to make more informed choices. Participants were also asked to provide advice to the department on how the provision of labour market information might be improved as well as on ideas to increase Albertans awareness of existing career services.

## Issues Associated With Enabling Learners' Career Decisions

Many participants felt that the main issue here was not the availability, but the accessibility of information. It was felt by most that greater marketing of career related information was

necessary and that more access points (e.g. libraries, shopping malls) needed to be used. Other issues raised by participants included:

- Career counselling (many felt that more information and training was needed by high school career counsellors).
- Apprenticeship (a need to adjust the attitudes of parents, teachers, high school counsellors and learners as to the viability of a career in the trades).
- A need for accurate and current labour market information and trends.
- Gender (promoting non-traditional career choices for both men and women).

### **Information Required to Make Informed Choices**

Participants generally felt that a wealth of information was currently available from the department. The concern was that existing access points were not well known or advertised and that more were needed, particularly in rural communities.

Participants agreed that the Adult Learning Information System (ALIS) website was a good start in terms of increasing access to career related information. It was suggested that the department continue to increase Internet access points through kiosks in shopping malls, libraries and other public facilities.

Participants stressed the importance of developing the role of career counsellors in high school. It was felt that counsellors needed more training and greater access to information resources to better educate young people to the full range of career possibilities and help them to undertake an informed career decision making process. Some participants felt that it was important to influence the biases of parents and counsellors who may place higher value on careers that require a university degree. It was agreed that both Alberta Education and the department needed to work more closely to support the Career and Labour Market (CALM) curriculum development and career counselling functions.

Participants recommended that information be provided to young learners in ways that relate to where they are at and in ways that are as interactive as possible. Ideas included:

- The use of CD ROMS that allow the user to explore career options.
- Job-shadowing and other real exposure opportunities to careers.
- Applied learning opportunities through space camps and other programs such as Red Deer Tech Prep.
- A smart card credit account allowing learners to "bank" the skills they have learned.
- Providing practical linkages to career exploration through all courses (e.g. resume writing in English).

Participants said information was needed on labour market trends as well as specific occupational information such as salaries and educational requirements. Participants also advocated information that would allow them to conveniently check out differences between institutional program offerings.

One participant suggested that learners would also benefit from the experiences of graduates and that regular surveys to capture such information should be undertaken. Another growing area of importance was for information about oneself through the maintenance of a skills portfolio.

### **Improving Information on Labour Market Needs and Career Opportunities**

Participants discussed partnerships as a key way to improve the quality and the flow of information. It was generally agreed that the department was on the right track in encouraging partnerships among all sectors. Participants stated that the support and participation of industry was vital to presenting direct career exploration opportunities to young people.

Increasing work experience opportunities for young people was seen as a key component of partnership arrangements. The department was asked to continue with initiatives like Careers: The Next Generation that encourage young

people to enter the trades. Participants also complimented the department's Registered Apprenticeship Program and recommended that the work experience component of the program be extended.

Participants provided a number of ideas aimed at improving information on labour market needs and career opportunities. These included:

- Creating drop-in centres for youth.
- Developing a CD ROM that focuses on the process used in making career decisions.
- Making the information at Career Development Centres available at post-secondary institutions.
- Making information from key performance indicators (KPI's) available to students.
- Using industry sources and Statistics Canada to provide more detailed local labour market information.
- Increasing awareness of existing information by running TV ads on stations like ACCESS, by opening shopping mall kiosks and by making it available to high school career counsellors, Employment Insurance (EI) offices.
- Making counselling more specific - especially for new Canadians who may not know the right questions to ask.
- Making bursary and loan information more widely available.
- Focusing on making information available to parents.

### **Increasing Awareness of Career Services**

It was generally agreed that the department needed to undertake a major media campaign to promote awareness of career information and career services. It was suggested that the department approach a major corporation to sponsor such a campaign. Some participants felt that if resources were scarce, the department should target a medium like television that would result in the greatest exposure. The department was also advised to run advertising campaigns at strategic times and locations.

Participants felt that the Adult Learning Information System (ALIS) should continue to be developed and be heavily promoted. It was suggested that ALIS include information for new Canadians and that linkages with professional organizations be made. Some participants commented that many individuals in rural areas did not have access to computers or the Internet and would have to be informed in other ways.

Improving public awareness of Career Development Centres (CDC's) was also seen as important. It was suggested that CDC's be open in the evenings and on week-ends. It was also recommended that the CDC's Career Information Display tour the province. Some participants felt that the department did not place enough value on career services. They suggested that the Minister should include visits to Career Development Centres as part of his making the "rounds" to post-secondary institutions and that the media be invited.

Other suggestions for the department in increasing the awareness of career services to Albertans included:

- Having departmental career counsellors work at public libraries.
- Training librarians about career planning and the related information materials.
- Using further education councils to share information.
- Developing shopping mall kiosks.
- Using CD ROMS as a way of reaching high school students in particular.
- Make improvements to the blue pages of the phone book to allow individuals easier access to career service information resources.

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### ***Advice to the Minister***

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- ◆ Undertake a full review of career information and career services and invite stakeholders to participate.
- ◆ Encourage industry to better communicate skill requirements.
- ◆ Engage in more planning with industry that focuses on career-based training.

- ◆ Implement prior learning assessment and work to shift employer attitudes so that they may recognize and value all types of learning.
- ◆ Develop the skills passport idea.
- ◆ Encourage post-secondary institutions to develop a customer service attitude towards learners.
- ◆ Work with Alberta Education to introduce a new 3-credit high school course in Career Exploring.
- ◆ Develop a standardized approach to accreditation and improve the coordination of programs between various partners (e.g. articulation agreements between high schools and post-secondary institutions to provide the learner with advanced standing in certain subject areas).
- ◆ Improve access to learning opportunities.
- ◆ Make the first year of study common at all post-secondary institutions.
- ◆ Improve transfer arrangements between post-secondary institutions.
- ◆ Provide a document after future Forums that describe what actions were taken by the department in response to what was said.
- ◆ Introduce the concept of a virtual Minister's Forum where input from interested stakeholders could be received on an ongoing basis.

# What the Minister's Forum is all about

This is the third report designed to keep you up-to-date about Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development's ongoing public consultation processes, particularly the Minister's Forum on Adult Learning. These consultation processes, which began in 1992 under the title "Adult Learning: Access Through Innovation", led to the development in 1994 of the document "New Directions for Adult Learning in Alberta", a policy framework and action plan for the renewal of the adult learning system in Alberta.

One of the strategic directions outlined in "New Directions" was that a Minister's Forum on Adult Learning be held to allow the Minister to report on the progress being made on the goals of accountability, accessibility, responsiveness and affordability and to gain feedback from stakeholders on the these results and other issues of concern.

As the chart demonstrates, consultation is very much a key component of the business planning process. A number of major consultations have taken place or are currently underway, the results of which will contribute to the development of future business plans.

This year's Minister's Forum on Adult Learning was held on November 25-26, 1997 in Edmonton and was attended by 238 participants. Participants included learners, representatives from post-secondary institutions, business, industry, and community groups. Approximately one fourth of the participants were learners.

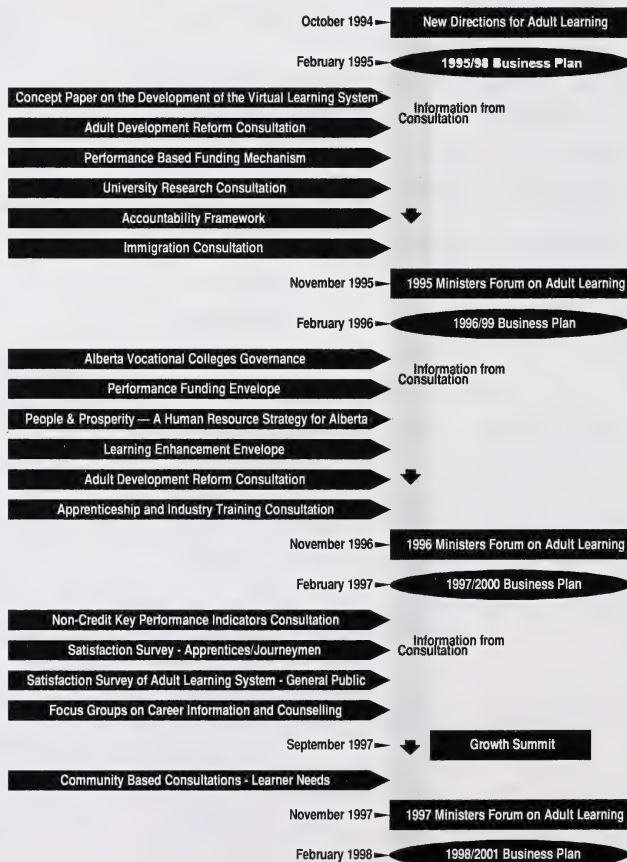
The composition of the discussions groups at the Forum were based on the participants selection of topics using a ranking. To encourage a wide range of views, a balance of participation from representative groups was arranged for

each small group session. The discussion was facilitated and recorded through arrangements made by the department. In addition, department resource people were included in each group to respond to questions or a need for clarification. Each group was asked to consider a number of questions related to each topic area. These questions generally addressed the following points:

- An assessment of issues underlying the challenges facing the adult learning system.
- Recommendations for priority actions.
- Identification of partner responsibilities for achievement of these priorities.
- Additional advice for the Minister.

To assist participants, a binder was prepared and sent in advance of the Forum. Each binder

## Departmental Public Consultation Initiatives (1995-1997)



contained background material to familiarize participants with the topic areas that would be discussed.

The Minister's Forum is now moving to a two-year format. The next Minister's Forum will take place in the fall of 1999 at a time and location to be announced. The department will continue to actively consult with its partners in adult learning and implement a series of sector-specific consultations in the period between Forums. These activities will inform the agenda setting process for future Minister's Forums.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

With the results of the Minister's Forum on Adult Learning and other consultations, the department will continue to provide you with information on the progress being made in the area of adult learning. It is important that we continue to communicate.

If you wish to provide information to the department or get on a departmental mailing list, please let us know, either electronically, by phone, fax or in person.

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